
Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange

CIRCA 1784-1882, BALTIMORE CITY

*A pioneer in the field of education in Baltimore
for neglected 'colored' children.*



COURTESY OF THE OBLATE SISTERS OF PROVIDENCE

Elizabeth Lange was the founder of the first United States Roman Catholic convent for black women. The Oblate Sisters of Providence opened their religious order in Baltimore on June 13, 1828, taking their vows and dedicating their lives to the education of the less fortunate. Lange was named Mother Superior and, with her solemn vows, took the name "Mary."

Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange traveled with her mother from Cuba to Baltimore several years earlier. Before living in Cuba, her family had fled Haiti to escape the atrocities of ruthless dictatorships and the resultant Haitian Revolution. Not much is known about Lange's early years, but historians believe she was educated and from a wealthy family. Her mother was the daughter of a Jewish plantation owner; probably, her father was a slave on Lange's grandfather's farm, evidenced by his surname, which was the same as her mother's (slaves commonly were given the last names of their owners). It is not clear why Lange and her mother left Cuba, but her father stayed behind when they moved to Baltimore (Breslaw 208).

As Lange walked the streets of Baltimore and saw the squalid living conditions, she realized that the black children who resided there, including many French-speaking Haitians, faced a bleak future if denied an education. Lange wanted to start a school, but the obstacles to a remedy were many: she was a black woman in Maryland, a slave state. She first tried operating a school from her home, but although she had start-up funds, education, desire, and fortitude, she was unsuccessful. The money ran out, forcing the

school to close.

Realizing she could not undertake such a challenging project single-handedly, Lange went to the religious hub for Haitians, St. Mary's Seminary Chapel. Here she found support from Father Hector Joubert, who encouraged her in not only her education goals but also her religious ones. Lange, deeply religious, wanted to enter religious life; however, religious orders accepted white women only at that time. The Catholic Church, as so many other religions adhering to the standards of the day, was racially segregated (Maryland Women's Hall of Fame).

But Father Joubert helped Lange find a place to establish her school, raised money for that school, and convinced her to establish a new order, its purpose education for black women. Under Lange's leadership, the school soon flourished. By the end of 1828, the burgeoning school was so overcrowded it had to move to larger quarters.

The larger new building was perfect, but its students encountered problems from the beginning, namely resentment and opposition from the segregated, neighboring community, which did not welcome people of color. As much as she inspired peace, Lange could not overcome the prejudice. Finally, with support from other Haitian refugees, Lange was able to find yet another location for her school, a school which still exists today in Baltimore.

St. Francis Academy, opened in 1829, was truly "a pioneer in the field of education in Baltimore for neglected 'colored' children" (Breslaw 210). Also, it was the earliest teacher-training institute in Baltimore for black women. Lange soon attracted other women into the order, and the first black American sister, Marie Anne Barclay, was admitted in 1830. Over the years, the Order of Oblate Sisters served the needs of black children in Baltimore and opened schools in other states.

But life was not to be easy for the sisters as the order faced its share of problems, especially during the early years. During the 1832 cholera epidemic, for instance, Lange and the sisters ministered to the sick without pay and without any official thanks from the city. In the 1830s, anti-Catholic riots invaded the South Baltimore school, forcing it to close for lack of police protection or support from the mayor. In the 1840s, hard times yet again threatened the order; when its beloved, ardent supporter, Father Joubert, died, the bishop, rather than continue support, ordered the nuns to close their convent. Defying his orders, they took in washing and performed other menial chores until another priest reinvigorated the demoralized group

(Breslaw 212). Fortitude saw them through, and the sisters managed to sustain themselves and their mission through years of adversity.

Lange lived long enough to attend ceremonies celebrating the Oblates' fiftieth anniversary and hear a reading of the order's impressive history. She died shortly thereafter in 1882, but her work goes on. Comprised mostly of black women,⁴ the order, having opened a child-development center in Arbutus, Maryland in 1872 and giving its time and resources still today, carries on Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange's educational mission—the teaching, loving and nurturing of children (Clarke). In 1991, Lange was inducted posthumously into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame. #

Rm. 217
1050 W3
Stegman

WOMEN



OF

ACHIEVEMENT

IN MARYLAND

HISTORY

Carolyn B. Stegman

Edited by Suzanne Nida Seibert